



Pre-K to Prison Pipeline

Educator Well-being

Educators' Stories About Their Own Wellness

Janelle's Story

"I think most of the time they're burned out. A lot of them talk about wanting to switch to something else within the educational field but not be a classroom teacher. Mostly feeling tired. I think, being tired. That's the number one thing, burnout." When asked what the key contributors are to burnout... "I think a few things. I think probably not being compensated. I'm sure that's number one. So that's part of it. I think also bringing work home, like there's really not an official end of the day. You could always be making activities, things like that. I think having to not only manage classroom behaviors, but also to [have] parent meetings, a conversation with the parent each time the kid gets dropped off, [and] a relationship with parents. And then, feeling frustrated with the quality of the staff that are there to support. Not the teacher and the teaching assistant that are consistent, but the staff that float among classrooms. I think there's a frustration with that, because everyone's a little bit different."

Arianna's Story

"We're all struggling with our own mental health. Teachers, included, have their trauma. So then, these are triggering some of these kids. So again, I think it's the supports. They have so much to do academically, and everybody's asking for the end product. And make sure everybody's happy during the day and safe and getting what they need. It's a lot. So it's hard to keep the morale, especially when there's 3, 4, or 5 children in a classroom that have severe behaviors. It took at least 9-10 months for 2 severely autistic children (to get supports); when they go to kindergarten, [they] are going to be put probably in an autistic support class. But in preschool they need to be in a class [with a] 10 to 1 ratio, you know. It's like they have different rules for early childhood preschool than they do for kindergarten, and that's not fair to teachers. They're like, I'm doing the best I can. What can I do?"

What are the Key Challenges to Educator Wellness?

1. Feeling Undervalued in Wages

One big challenge for many teachers is low pay. In Pennsylvania, teachers in every county earn less than what's considered a living wage or the amount needed to meet basic needs (PA Partnership for Children, 2023). Experienced teachers in early childhood education (ECE) are paid even less than teachers in K-12 schools (see table). So, an educator teaching a 5-year-old in a full day preK setting could be paid almost \$40k less than an educator teaching that same child when the child is in kindergarten or first grade. Many ECE teachers also don't get health insurance through their jobs. Research shows that when teachers have enough money to meet their needs, they tend to feel better emotionally too (Cassidy et al., 2019). In one study, preschool teachers with lower pay had students who struggled more with emotions and behavior (King et al., 2016).

TABLE: Average Salary for Teachers in Pennsylvania

PreK	Elementary	Middle School	High School
\$36,500	\$77,650	\$82,890	\$84,500

(PA Partnerships for Children, 2023)

2. Feeling Undervalued and Low Resourced

ECE teachers are dealing with two big problems:

1. There is a staffing shortage in ECE. In Pennsylvania, the number of ECE workers dropped by about 40% between 2019 and 2023. Even strong programs are closing classrooms or turning families away because they don't have enough staff.
2. In interviews, many ECE teachers said they're seeing more children with big emotions and behavior challenges. They often feel unsure or unprepared to help in the ways children need. This makes their work even more stressful.

"Job related burnout can lead to problems with body, emotions, and mental well being that lowers ability to maintain meaningful, positive teaching and relationships with the preschoolers."

(Schaack et al, 2020)

3. Feeling Undervalued as a Human

Many ECE educators are feeling burned out. Burnout means feeling tired, stressed, and worn down from work. When teachers feel this way, they are more likely to leave their jobs (Carson et al., 2017). This is a serious problem. When teachers leave, it can hurt young children's emotional well-being (Cassidy et al., 2019). It also makes it harder for the teachers who stay to meet children's growing needs.

Limited Knowledge

Most research about educator needs, including well being, focuses on K-12 schools. In ECE, this means preschools, preschool staff, and preschool children are often left out (De Los Santos et al., 2023). This is a concern because lawmakers often use research to decide what programs get funding and support. If preschool data is missing, policies may not meet the real needs of ECE.

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